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New memorial honors Japanese-Americans

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WASHINGTON -- With the snip of a celebratory red ribbon and the single toll of a mournful bell, Japanese-Americans on Friday received the final installment of redress from the U.S. government for their treatment during World War II -- a new memorial commemorating their experience during those years.

The National Japanese American Memorial seeks to honor the courage and patriotism of those who were either held against their will at internment camps or served with the U.S. military in Europe and the Pacific.

``The forced evacuation and internment of more than 120,000 loyal Japanese-Americans simply on the basis of their race stands as one of the greatest mass abrogations of civil liberties in our history," said Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta, a San Jose native who was sent to one of those camps with his family when he was 10. ``But the message of this memorial is not just one of tragedy, it is a message of faith in this nation. It is a message of hope. And it is ultimately a message of national redemption."

Mineta gave the keynote address to about 250 people as the National Japanese American Memorial officially opened Friday. He and others said its completion helps bring closure to Japanese-Americans for their experiences in World War II, while at the same time raising awareness of the episode to try to ensure that no other group suffers a similar experience.

Helping tell story

``We hope this will help tell the story, the Japanese-American history in the United States," said Fred Ushima, 81, of Salinas, who spent two years in an internment camp in Arkansas during the war. ``It's going to take time. But at least this is a beginning. The Californians know all about the evacuation . . . but telling the story to all Americans, I think this will help do that."

In the months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. government rounded up Japanese-Americans on the West Coast. They were first held under armed guard in detention centers like the Stockton County Fairgrounds before being shipped in darkened trains to 10 internment camps -- Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, as well as locations in Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado and Arkansas.

Mineta, a former congressman from San Jose, helped lead the effort that resulted in the building of the National Japanese American Memorial on a triangular patch of land 600 yards from the U.S. Capitol. He and other Japanese-American lawmakers succeeded in passing legislation into law in 1988 that resulted in an official apology from the United States government for violating the internees' constitutional rights, a $20,000 payment for each person held and authorization of construction of a memorial in the nation's capital.

The $13 million memorial was built with private contributions through an ambitious fundraising effort across the Japanese-American community. Under the shade of cherry trees, the memorial tries to tell the story of that community's experience during World War II.

Granite walls are etched with the names of the internment camps, quotes from people such as Mineta and former

President Reagan, and the names of about 800 Japanese-Americans who died fighting against Japan and Germany.

Some Japanese-Americans were dismayed last year that one panel is inscribed with the words of the late Mike Masaoka, who was Mineta's brother-in-law. He was criticized for having advocated cooperation with the government during the war, fought against redress and suggested a suicide battalion of Japanese-Americans.

Seen as a hero

But Masaoka also is seen as a hero for his postwar accomplishments. He fought successfully for the 1952 Walter-McCarran Act allowing immigrant Japanese to become naturalized citizens and worked to win $1.2 billion in reparations for camp survivors.

Facing the memorial's stone panels is a reflecting pool with five large stones representing Japan, Okinawa and the three generations of Japanese-Americans who struggled during the war years. Visitors can ring a large, tube-shaped bronze bell, reminiscent of the bells at Japanese temples, with its solemn tone designed to provoke reflection.

The monument's centerpiece is a 14-foot sculpture of two cranes entangled in barbed wire but still reaching for the sky. The bird is the Japanese symbol of long life.

Questions provoked

``It's in a location where a lot of non-Japanese visit, and they're going to ask questions when they see this memorial. Some of them probably have never heard of the internment camps," said Denny Yasuhara, 75, of Spokane, Wash. His father, sister and brother were sent to the camps from Seattle. He avoided that fate because he was living in Eastern Washington, adopted by family friends after his mother died when he was an infant.

Like many present for the opening, his wife, Thelma, 71, used a pencil and paper to make rubbings of the names of his brother and a distant relative killed in combat.

``It's kind of overwhelming," she said. ``I'm very grateful for the government doing this. It's a great country that's able to say, `We did wrong.' "

As a former teacher, U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, agreed that the memorial will be a ``wonderful educational piece." He was an infant when he was sent with his family from their Walnut Grove home in the Sacramento Valley to the Amache internment camp in eastern Colorado.

Honda remembers little of the experience, but he dabbed tears from his eyes when he thought of the pain his parents suffered.

``No amount of money could ever heal that. But what did help was the apology, the recognition," Honda said. ``Japanese-Americans who came here, came to a promise. They tried to live it, it was broken, then it got mended. This is a good exhibit of that."

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